Nonprofits Offer a Road Map for Colleges Implementing the Google IT Certificate Program

EDITORS

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

Introduction

Over the past three years, JFF has been supporting a community of more than 100 U.S. community colleges (CCs) and over 25 nonprofit organizations (NPOs) worldwide implementing the Google IT Support Professional Certificate training program. During this engagement, JFF has gathered valuable insights about best practices in designing Google IT Certificate training in various settings.

Among NPOs, we saw substantial positive outcomes regarding the recruitment of diverse participants, retention of students, and completion of the program due to the networks and approaches the NPOs adopted. During the engagement, JFF was able to draw insights from both direct coaching with the CC and NPO sites as well as through research and evaluation. While there are important contextual differences between U.S. CCs and NPOs, it is important to note that opportunities do exist to leverage successful practices across provider types.

This brief offers actionable strategies for CCs to apply evidence-based practices developed by NPOs to increase retention, completion, and job placement through short-term and online workforce training opportunities.

Strategies for Increasing Program Success Developed by NPOs

Build In Inclusive Recruitment and Onboarding Processes

NPOs spend a considerable amount of time upfront assessing prospective learners' motivations, interests, and IT skills. Their goal is to help individuals determine whether the Google IT Certificate program matches their career goals, and to begin to identify supports for their success. Once learners are enrolled in the program, NPOs provide intensive intake and orientation activities for them to learn about program rules and expectations, especially around attendance and commitment. These activities have helped NPOs achieve strong retention and completion rates.

JFF has learned that multiple steps in the readiness assessment and onboarding processes can be used strategically not to screen out learners but rather to help level access and completion disparities across race, gender, and income. Through the readiness assessments and intake procedures, providers have the opportunity to identify the types of support learners need in order to prepare for the program and to ensure that learners receive those supports both before they are officially enrolled and while they are progressing through the required courses. During this phase, it is also critical for learners to see that people with similar backgrounds and experiences have successfully completed the program. NPOs have done this by inviting individuals working in IT from various backgrounds to share their experiences with learners to convey the message that they too can achieve success in the IT field.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
Merit America offers an online application that asks potential students questions about their IT experience and training and their personal access to technology. **Goodwill Industries** uses the Northstar Digital Literacy assessment to gauge a learner's digital literacy before the start of the program; this is coupled with a survey to assess their motivation and interest. **GISC Canada** sites have a strong initial screening process and use interviews and a statement of purpose to vet student interest in and readiness for the program. After completing the initial screening process, prospective learners also get a chance to ask questions and learn more about the Google IT Certificate.	*Readiness assessments* • Have certificate expectations, policies, and available supports clearly outlined and available online as well as in marketing materials. • Meet with counselors before or during first week of classes to identify what supports will be beneficial to the student. • Use the results from the assessments not only to determine the student's readiness for the program but to offer guidance on how it can prepare the student for future certifications. *Onboarding* • Offer mandatory orientation activities before the program starts or during the first week; this should include specific program and job placement expectations, policies, timelines, support services, resources for maximizing student success, opportunities for troubleshooting technology platforms and logins, and job placement services. • Develop a mentorship program; a mentor can be a faculty member, an industry representative, or a fellow student who has experience taking online courses. • Design personalized learning plans to support a learner's success in the program based on an assessment of math, writing, and computer skills. • Foster community and sense of belonging through meetups and other platforms.

Pair Technical Content With a Robust Baseline Skills Curriculum

NPOs developed curricula and other materials to teach baseline skills (i.e., nontechnical skills that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with others), which they see as critical to their learners' success in the job market. Employers report that these skills are vital in the workplace and can impact culture, mindsets, leadership, ability to learn in the workplace, and individual and group performance. Therefore, organizations can partner with IT employers to promote these skills through work-based learning experiences, which in turn can help employers assess the skills of workers who lack a postsecondary degree but do have relevant experience and training.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
International Youth Foundation (IYF) Mexico developed Passport to Success (PTS) Traveler, a free, mobile-optimized, game-based course to support young people ages 16 to 24 in developing baseline skills such as time management, problem solving, and self-confidence. PTS Traveler is offered in combination with the Google IT Certificate's Coursera coursework, a strategy that IYF sees as key to helping prepare young people for the technical and social-emotional demands of the workplace.	• Actively engage learners in existing college programs that support baseline skills attainment. • Survey employer partners on the most critical nontechnical employability skills they are seeking. • Offer students additional coaching and training on time management and organizational skills in a format that supports flexible self-pacing. • Integrate work-based learning to build these skills in a professional context. See the section on work-based learning below.

Active Employer Engagement

A focus on active engagement with the employer community has allowed NPOs to design programming in sync with employer needs and to secure employer participation in program activities. Several NPOs convene employer partners regularly to seek feedback on program elements such as design, curriculum content, and labor market information. They also use these opportunities to seek company volunteers to participate in career exploration activities, conduct mock interviews, and sponsor speaking engagements so learners can hear what it's like to work in IT and the types of skills and credentials that employers want.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
NPower Canada and **NPower U.S.** have set up industry councils to make sure their IT training programs are aligned with the demands of their local IT industries. The industry councils comprise representatives from across industry sectors and partner organizations and serve as thought partners to provide industry insight into current hiring trends and skills. The councils also help vet program designs to ensure that participants are equipped with the technical and professional skills that are most in demand by the industry.	**_Priority strategies_** • Develop a communication campaign for employers that includes tiers of participation to support the program. • Start small and seek early wins, such as partnering with employers on lunch-and-learns, job fairs, informational interviews, or guest speaker experiences to support students in learning how to apply and interview for job opportunities. • Leverage existing industry advisory boards or create one to support this program. • Integrate career services such as O*Net, CareerOneStop, or virtual career networks to support learners in understanding skills taught through the program and their employment prospects. **_Additional strategies_** • Connect with employers to inform them of the program so that they can recruit existing employees and send them through the training. • See JFF's _Employer Engagement Guide for community colleges_ for additional resources.

Customize Wraparound Supports to Learner Needs

Across the board, NPOs have very strong practices in place regarding wraparound supports. They provide a wide range of supportive services, including academic support, career advising, counseling, case management, and mentoring opportunities, so that learners can focus on completing the program.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
IYF Mexico and **JA Brazil** are NPOs that assess learner support needs during intake and orientation. The information is then used by staff members to create customized support plans for each learner and to set up referral agreements with other partner organizations. The need for supports has been even more critical during the pandemic because some learners do not have devices or connectivity for proper internet access. Others have been dealing with physical, mental health, and financial challenges. NPOs have worked during the pandemic to provide laptops and hot-spot devices to help learners access the internet. Some have created regular check-ins with learners via Zoom or WhatsApp to as a way to keep learners engaged during lockdowns. NPO staffs have also developed online activities for students to practice technical and baseline skills.	*Priority strategies* • Integrate wraparound supports into program marketing, offerings, and delivery, and ensure that there are professional development opportunities for faculty members and counselors. • Focus supports on students underrepresented in terms of college or program completion, including nontraditional learners and those who previously withdrew from online courses. • Partner with nonprofit and community-based partners to help provide wraparound supports for learners, including colocating particular courses at NPO sites to leverage their services. *Additional strategies* • Before introducing the program, put together a support team made up of faculty, advising, and student support services and NPOs to create a success map that spans from initial assessment to completion. • Leverage categorical funds to ensure learners can access support services. • Use an early-alert system to proactively identify students who might be falling behind. • Conduct continuous data collection and analysis to ensure ongoing improvements to student services, policies, and procedures.

Offer Work-Based Learning Experiences

NPOs have historically achieved high job placement rates in their training programs by integrating work-based learning opportunities into their program delivery models, in addition to engaging employers. On-the-job experience is therefore built into expectations around learners' participation and provides an additional incentive for recruitment and retention.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
NPower's twenty-three-week Tech Fundamentals program includes a seven-week paid internship designed to help learners gain on-the-job experience, earn an income, and manage personal finances. Recently, because of the pandemic, many companies have scaled back on hiring interns. In response to this, NPower is developing simulated work assignments and rojects to give students who are not placed in internships hands-on experience before entering the work world. **Year Up** learners spend the second half of their yearlong program interning with an employer partner, such as a law firm or financial services or tech company. Year Up takes into account a number of factors when placing learners in internships, including learning track, internship role, performance in the program, company/manager profile, and student commute time. Learners are paid and gain real work experience during the internships. In addition, Year Up ensures that students continue to receive support on a consistent basis from an assigned company mentor and from Year Up staff members. Interns meet as a cohort back at the Year Up location (or virtually) once a week for an internship seminar class that is taught by Year Up's employment placement staff.	• Encourage braided funding opportunities to pay participants for training or provide college credit for independent study, electives, course substitution, or prior learning that is aligned to a pathway leading to a relevant degree or certificate. • Partner with community-based organizations to leverage employer connections and the effective delivery of career readiness training. • Make work-based learning a mandatory part of the program offering. • See JFF's Work-Based Learning Framework.

Broad and Targeted Marketing and Recruitment

NPOs used the Google IT Certificate opportunity to expand marketing and participant recruitment in their communities. NPOs initially cast a wide net to create buzz about the certificate and generate interest from learners. They then worked to narrow the pool of candidates by focusing on learners who had the potential and motivation to take on and complete the training program in the designated time frame.

Examples From NPO Partners	Applying This Learning to CCs
IYF Colombia developed short student profile videos to support recruitment. These videos were also shared with partners to support communication about the training opportunity. The organization also developed guidelines for implementation sites to use around job placement and employer engagement.	Colleges can leverage the certificate program to broaden the channels they may typically pursue in marketing a program. Make sure there is a website or other channels for participants to go to in order to clearly understand the expectations of the program. Consider the following activities and avenues for marketing the program: • Press releases and features about the program by local media. • In-class announcements. • Informational flyers for counselors to distribute. • Public service announcements. • College websites and social media. • Workforce boards. • On-campus orientations to introduce the program. • Finally, offering the program as part of a consortium is another way to leverage the power of the region to amplify the message and opportunity.

Conclusion

Having supported both NPOs and CCs to design and implement the Google IT Certificate, JFF has seen innovative practices on both sides. JFF believes that CCs have a unique opportunity to improve outcomes for their learners and meet the growing demand for short-term, work-oriented online credentials by embedding programs such as the Google IT Certificate training program into existing career pathways and by adapting the practices and lessons outlined in this guide. This type of openness to new ideas and innovations is ultimately what will be needed for community colleges to achieve superior outcomes for all of their target populations and support economic recovery and growth in their regions.